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06 October 2017

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

McKenzie, William (2017) 'Failure and impure narcissism in *Oh les beaux jours* and 'Une journée de Brulard''.', in Flaubert, Beckett, NDiaye : the aesthetics, emotions and politics of failure. Leiden: Brill, pp. 118-132. Faux titre. (414).

Further information on publisher's website:

https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004337343_009

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Failure and impure narcissism in *Oh les beaux jours* and *Une journée de Brulard*

It is perhaps more than coincidence that two great theorists of narcissism have marked substantially the critical reception and analytical methodology of texts by Samuel Beckett and Marie NDiaye. Theodor Adorno famously praises Beckett as a 'realist' because Beckett's work challenges contemporary life's irrationality and tendency to violence; it refuses – or consciously 'fails' – to show such a world a comfortingly 'narcissistic' image of itself.¹ In Andrew Asibong's reading, Marie NDiaye's work offers a productively and revealingly racialized supplement to André Green's construction of la 'mère morte', a concept which owes much to Freud's notion of 'primary narcissism' and its corresponding model of successful or failed psychological development.² Critical work on Beckett and NDiaye thus reveals narcissism's marked, even surprising, breadth and polyvalence, and its usefulness when dealing with ideas of failure: societal malaise; art's successful (or not) mimetic relationship to such a malaise (especially in the case of Adorno's reading of Beckett); or 'successful' or 'failed' psychological upbringing (in that of Asibong's Greenian reading of NDiaye). It is within just this kind of densely intertwined network of issues that I seek to pick out an 'aesthetics of failure' in selected texts by the two writers: the way they not only depict successful or failed individuals, or the societal constructs which define them as such, but also in how the writers build 'success' or 'failure' into their very means, and portrayals, of communication. By discussing in turn Adorno's work on Beckett, Beckett's *Oh les beaux jours*, Green's work on narcissism, and NDiaye's short story *Une journée de Brulard*, I hope to demonstrate how Beckett and NDiaye may offer a suppler and more intimately gendered, racialized and embodied treatment of narcissism, and its relation to failure, than any

¹ An exemplary quote: 'It is evident that there is something uncanny about this reality [...] in Beckett it is pushed to the manifest *destruction* of reality.' Theodor Adorno. *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2010) 39, my italics.

² See Andrew Asibong, *Marie NDiaye: Blankness and Recognition* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013) and 'Marie NDiaye, the half-self and the white "dead" mother' in *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 15: 3/4 (2012): 541–59, as well as Asibong's chapter in the present volume.

theoretical framework could allow: they argue for the ubiquity of variously impure, 'failed', forms of narcissism, in myriad relationships with persons and things.

Adorno/Horkheimer and Green's theorisations of narcissism both rely significantly on the complex of causality offered in Sigmund Freud's 1914 essay *On the Introduction of narcissism*;³ but they take this complex in very different directions: the first outwards, into questions of collective co-existence, the second inwards, looking at the intimate effect of primary and primordial experiences on individual psychology. As will be seen, Freud's diagnostic narrative of the causes of narcissism afford the term a far greater semantic breadth than is commonly understood. For Freud, the 'narcissistic' behaviours he sees on the couch nostalgically re-enact (and strive to recapture) 'primary narcissism': a blissful early mistaking of the maternal body with a sense of pure infinity and plenitude, which occurs before castration-fear and the Oedipus complex compels a person to leave such comforts, to confront instead paternal structures of gender, authority, and language, and thus become subjectively and self-consciously aware of his or her-self as an individuated element within such structures.

Adorno finds Beckett's art admirable – 'sad', 'rich', 'realist' – because it parodies a post-war modernity where such narcissistic behaviour is widespread, encouraged by all kinds of professional, institutional and cultural determinants.⁴ Adorno and his colleague Max Horkheimer observe and bemoan a lack of paternal interdictions and repressions in modern Western society. Deep historical changes to the traditional bourgeois family unit, for example, sees child-rearing responsibility increasingly transferred to state institutions (especially schools): 'the socially conditioned weakness of the father prevents the child's real identification with him'.⁵ This critique should emphatically not be seen as a kind of facile nostalgia for a world where men were men and everybody else knew their place; quite the contrary. Horkheimer suggests instead such family dynamics once offered the

³ See Freud, 'On the introduction of narcissism' in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and other Essays*, trans. Mark Edmondson and John Reddick (London: Penguin. 2003).

⁴ See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 39.

⁵ C. Fred Alford, *Narcissism: Socrates, the Frankfurt School, and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New York, London: Yale University Press, 1988), 128.

psychological basis, opportunity and potential for paternal rivalry, which would then form the basis for resistant, rebellious and non-conformist subjectivities. And what Adorno and Horkheimer call 'the end of the individual' (or what Herbert Marcuse calls 'the obsolescence of Freudian man')⁶⁷ extends easily disquietingly into wider, more politicised realms: 'today the growing child, who has received only the abstract idea of arbitrary power, looks for a stronger, more powerful father'.⁸ Following this logic, these Frankfurt School thinkers suggest subjects who are bought up without satisfactory Oedipal resolutions, and thus find themselves retarded in narcissistic stages of development, lead to weakened resistance to the perceived advantages of dictatorship: its promises of conformist sameness and homogeneity, its easy, persecutory answers to anything different or alien. Mass increases in narcissistic personality traits and psychological effects are thus coincident with, and explained by, dynamics of collective, defensive conformity, which ultimately and collectively culminate in totalitarianism: a narcissistic return to a collective whole.

This politicised urge to homogeneity is caused by and parallels a 'rational' tendency towards singularity (competitive advantage, optimum efficiency, speed, output), which yields only irrational results (such a logic ultimately destroys everyone due to their inevitable inefficiency in one domain or other).⁹ If the yearning for pure singularity mirrors Narcissus's impossible yearning for oneness with his reflection – Narcissus warns not only of vanity but also reason's paranoid, megalomaniac urge to totalise – then Adorno insists art *qua* art must in this sense be resolutely anti-narcissistic. It must challenge false criteria for rationality and success; it must therefore 'fail' in order to be 'true'.¹⁰ Art thus contrasts starkly with the generic outputs of the 'Culture Industry' (films, records, radio-programmes) which strive, like the society that generates them, to attain a kind of brainwashed

⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 128

⁹ Adorno's resistance to the idea of reason as a faculty which seeks universalised, irrefutable and straightforward 'truth' is famously expressed in his paradoxical refutation of Hegel's famous maxim 'the whole is the true'. 'The whole is the false', Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, London: Verso, 2005), 50.

¹⁰ Much of the discussion which follows on Adorno, failure, 'mimesis' and 'form' is indebted to Peter Osborne's essay 'Adorno and the Metaphysics of Modernism: The Problem of a "Postmodern" Art', in *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, ed. Andrew Benjamin, London, Routledge, 1989, 23-48.

smoothness of production and consumption. Unlike such commodities, the ‘truth’ of a work of art emerges when this process is frustrated, when the artwork wars with itself, when its mimetic elements (those which presuppose by referring towards an external “reality”) are noticeably antagonised or ‘sedimented’ by its form.¹¹

A shambled anagram of modern life, *Oh les beaux jours* clearly sees mimesis and form interacting in this antagonistic way. The play *does* have a mimetic element; it imitates remnants of a world identifiable as ours, as if gropingly nostalgic for a reality that makes sense. Winnie’s appearance – ‘grassouillette’, decked out with her ‘ombrelle’, ‘bec-de-cane’, ‘corsage très décolleté’, and ‘collier de perles’ (11-12) – is so stereotypical of the ‘woman-of-a-certain-age’ as to approach caricature; her rituals – waking, brushing her teeth, praying, sleeping – likewise imitate broadly ‘normal’ patterns of behaviour.¹² The play moreover references or alludes to culturally-recognisable texts and signifiers, such as advertising blurb (‘véritable pur’), picture postcards (as confiscated from Willie by an appalled Winnie), or music hall lyrics (as sung near the end). Winnie and Willie resemble in many ways an end-of-pier double act; or, in the use of a chatterbox, nagging wife and a balding, beleaguered husband, early 60s marital sitcoms like *Father Knows Best* or *Marriage Lines*. There is also a touch of the Agatha Christie murder mystery: with the gun lurking ominously in the side-lines (especially when Willie crawls towards it), the play similarly juxtaposes polite middle-class respectability with a raging urge to murder.

But these variously allusive or representational modes of mimesis are of course made strange by the antagonistic, often unexplained, imposition of Beckett’s artistic will. One can think of few more

¹¹ The notion that ‘great art’ is not organically harmonious but internally differentiated is stated, for example, when Adorno and Horkheimer praise artists who ‘never [...] embodied a wholly perfect and flawless style’. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (London: Verso, 1997), 130. Beckett’s markedly and provocatively contradictory and challenging art is for Adorno a ‘negative imprint’ of the claustrophobically bureaucratic and totalising ‘administered world’ (and, it is implied, its concomitant culture industry): Beckett is therefore a ‘realist’ because it exposes this ostensibly ‘rational’ world’s repressed madness and horror. See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 39-40.

¹² Beckett, *Oh les beaux jours* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2010). Owing to the large number of quotes from Beckett’s *Oh les beaux jours* and NDiaye’s ‘Une journée de Brulard’, the page numbers from these texts will be shown in brackets in the body of the text.

literal, or emphatic, examples of such an imposition than burying your central character up to her neck. The world of *Oh les beaux jours* is strange indeed. No explanation is given as to why Winnie (and her near-silent partner Willie) are stranded in a remote, empty place, marked by extreme heat and sunlight, woken and sent to sleep by a piercing bell, or why the objects in Winnie's bag will magically resurface the following day. The audience's understanding is impeded by literally hundreds of pauses, which are often long. But if Beckett's contradictory art resists the smooth conformist rationality of a single-mindedly 'narcissistic' modernity, as Adorno argues, it also critiques as simplistic any association of such rationality with narcissism: Winnie's relationship with her mirror is in fact dynamic, emotionally complex, and often productive of the resistant, anti-conformist subjectivity the Frankfurt philosophers implicitly counsel. Her narcissisms trace her attempt to 'fail better': in her dealings with herself, with her husband, with the objects she uses in her daily tasks, and with her play-going spectator.

Winnie's mirror – obviously much more visible in the first act, before she is entirely immobilised – is a markedly ambivalent prop, in its twin senses of stage property and support. It encapsulates many of the play's themes and motifs: the maintenance of cheerful self-esteem in the wake of terrible hardship; the onrush of time and physical decrepitude; sexual desire and desirability.

[Winnie] sort une petite glace, revient de face) – hé oui – (elle s'inspecte les dents dans la glace) – pauvre cher Willie – (elle éprouve avec le pouce ses incisives supérieures, voix indistincte) – bon sang ! (elle soulève la lèvre supérieure afin d'inspecter les gencives, de même) – bon Dieu ! – (elle tire sur un coin de sa bouche, bouche ouverte, de même) – enfin – (l'autre coin, de même) – pas pis (elle abandonne l'inspection, voix normale) – pas mieux, pas pis (14)

This first look in the mirror takes place after only about two minutes of stage-time: from the very beginning the play stresses Winnie's care over her appearance. Mirror-checking is not quite her first action – that is brushing her teeth – but she checks the results of her handiwork soon after. But

while this suggests narcissism marks even the most mundane parts of Winnie's life, it also implies her narcissism is less unthinking, automatic or blissful than the Frankfurt School's post-Freudian sociology might suggest. Indeed, this moment is imbued with urgent unease. The characteristically precise Beckettian stage-directions, accentuated by conspicuous repetition ('de même') stress Winnie interrogates her body quite meticulously for signs of decay or disfigurement. She alludes wistfully to her decrepit husband ('pauvre cher Willie') as she looks at herself, explaining her subsequent bursts of alarm ('bon sang!', 'Bon Dieu!'). Winnie's narcissism is thus not peaceful, static, or self-contained: rather, it is porously vulnerable to fleeting identifications with her husband's increasingly visible mortality. It is therefore dynamic, time-bound: its pleasures, or at least relief ('pas mieux, pas pis') are subsequent to and dependent on an early anxiety. The familiarly cyclical, even purgatorial nature of Beckettian time – fail again, fail better – seems here, momentarily, to map onto Winnie's narcissistic relationship with herself.

The mirror's ambivalent status persists throughout, as when Winnie smashes it and throws it away. Recognising that it will be there 'à nouveau là demain, dans le sac, sans une égratignure' (46) she seems to break down in tears: '*la voix se brise, elle baisse la tête [...] Un temps long, tête baissée*' (*ibid*). It is as if Winnie breaks as her mirror does, even as if she seeks to free herself from it, suggesting a comparable fragility in the woman and her reflection. Indeed, Winnie's verbose cheerfulness is haunted by her sense of her fleeting and fading beauty, especially as evidenced in her imperfect attempts to see and interact with Willie. Her frequent invitations ('Que tu viendras vivre de ce côté que je puisse te voir' (54)) are never quite fully accepted. Jealous and appalled by his sexy picture postcards, she later asks him explicitly, and repeatedly 'Fut-il jamais un temps où je te pouvais séduire [...]?' (38) and regrets her fading looks: 'j'étais jeunette et... follette (*la voix brise, elle baisse la tête*) ... belle... peut-être... jolie... en un sens... à regarder. (*Un temps. Elle lève la tête.*) Pardonne-moi, Willie, on a de ces... bouillons de mélancolie' (41). As if in anxious compensation, she files her nails and puts on lipstick with conspicuous frequency. Her figure is, likewise, a topic for recurrent, self-critical comment: 'La terre est juste aujourd'hui, pourvu que je ne me sois empâtée.' (35); in the second act

she regrets the disappearance of her breasts, submerged beneath the earth (61). Even traits commonly judged as unattractive, like sweating, become a case for nostalgia: 'je transpire abondamment (*Un temps.*) Autrefois' (42).

The play juxtaposes throughout Winnie's sustained concern over her appearance with her anxious relationship with Willie, as if setting up a silent, sustained analogy between the gratifications offered by her mirror and by her husband. Winnie's vulnerable but determinedly upheld self-image depends on both. She repeatedly expresses a fear of solitude ('si seulement je pouvais supporter être seule', 26, 34), and even tests how far Willie can move before disappearing out of earshot, concluding that she is reassured only 'te sentir là à la portée de voix (33). Such dependency is illustrated also in the peculiar game of laughter they share, where one laughs, then they laugh together, then another laughs: Willie's rare responses are greeted with joy (34). The developing idea that Willie is like his wife's second, reflected self is furthered by Winnie's insistence that she would stay completely mute were Willie to die, save for the occasional sigh 'dans la glace' (27), and culminates in the closing stage-tableau, where the two gaze at each other silently and at some length. The implied transferability between Willie and Winnie's reflection helps explain an otherwise curious formulation in the second act: Winnie complains not that she no longer needs her mirror, but that her mirror no longer needs her (65); it might also explain Winnie's tendency to address herself in the third person ('commence ta journée, Winnie' (13), 'continue, Winnie' (17), 'chante ta vieille prière, Winnie' (73)); this abstracted 'Winnie' is, perhaps, especially given their isolated and close contact, how Winnie imagines a desirous Willie might see her, an idea which inspires her to start her day, pray, carry on, survive, fail better.

Winnie's relationship with her mirror, and its frequent association with her husband, exemplifies her strange tendency to invest emotionally in other inanimate objects, especially her bag, magnifying glass, parasol, cold cream, and gun. They, too, may be seen as substitutes for human contact: Winnie announces 'les choses ont leur vie [...] les choses ont une vie' (65) and even gives her gun a name ('vieux Brownie', 39, 64); in Willie's effective absence, Winnie hints at an addiction to dip into her bag, to handle these inanimate but alive and life-giving objects ('un petit plongeon peut-être

quand même' 39). Considering Winnie's self-consciousness about her beauty and desirability, it is not surprising Winnie's relationship with her beauty-products – her 'pick-me-up' tonic, lipstick, comb and brush – is especially intense. Her recurrent taking them out or putting them back seems almost to try to bring them to life, as if they offer some kind of companionship in themselves, if not lend her the kind of beauty which may 'seduce' her distracted husband.

The mirror, then, is a privileged symbol and key influencer of the play's key themes and relationships: superficially, it reveals and develops Winnie's narcissistic anxieties about her self-image as a desirable woman; more importantly, its subtle, structural association between this self-image and Willie intimates how Winnie forms relationships with animate and inanimate objects alike, and thus how her play invests even the most familiar routines and things with a strange emotional richness. These communicational strategies seep even into the play's mirror-like structure and self-conscious relationship with its own spectator. The tableau – the hillock from which Winnie protrudes – demands a 'maximum [...] de symétrie', and its dualist, repetitious patterning seems to enact such symmetries as the narrative unfolds: act one both begins and ends with prayer, for example; the music box resurfaces at comparable points in act one and act two. And it is in this broadly symmetrical framework that Winnie notes: 'Étrange sensation, que quelqu'un me regarde' (48): We watch her watching us, as if in each other's looking glass.

Winnie at some points finds this reciprocated gaze from 'outside' supportive: 'Quelqu'un me regarde encore, (*Un temps.*) Se soucie de moi encore (*Un temps.*) Ça que je trouve si merveilleux. (*Un temps.*) Des yeux sur mes yeux ' (60); but Winnie's intimation of such a gaze also implicates her spectators – us – in a kind of uneasy, voyeuristic guilt. Standing out amongst Winnie's often near-obsessively repeated gestures and verbal tics are two intertwined stories of sexual attack: first, that of 'Mildred' or 'Millie' (66-7), a woman who like Winnie has lived 'une longue vie' and sees as a child her doll 'Fille' undressed; secondly, that of 'Piper' or 'Cooker' (70-71) – names which surface earlier, much more innocuously – who leer over Winnie, asking 'si elle est à poil là-dedans' while she is immobile and powerless to resist (70). The power of these scenes lies at least partially in the

undoubted rawness of the trauma: Winnie's actual screams as she describes a mouse running up 'Millie's' thigh make a rare and dramatic contrast from the predominant tone of nervously fussy cheerfulness. But it also lies in the way it at once invites and frustrates the audience's desire to arrive at a singular conclusion as to what actually happened. We only get broken scraps of meaning. Is the doll a repressed memory of Winnie herself? Is 'Millie' a kind of screen memory for Winnie's elder female abuser? Or is Willie the abuser? 'Millie' is, after all, only 'Willie' with the 'W' inverted...

Beckett's 'failure' to appease an audience's curiosity is not quite a straightforward challenge to narcissism, as the theoretical readings outlined above might suggest; indeed, the play's mysteries are by contrast inseparable from the mirror-like structure which frames them: the aesthetic effect depends on narcissism being enticed and frustrated at once. Correspondingly, while the play clearly antagonises mimesis and form (to use Adorno's terminology) it is worth noting that not all its elements can be so neatly differentiated. Often the play's 'mimetic' or 'formal' elements fuse together, especially if it is interpreted allegorically or near-allegorically, as the very strangeness of the play seems to encourage. Seen thus, a different kind of confusion arises: perhaps we're not watching 'Winnie' but what is happening in Winnie's head, or even a strange alchemy of both. Or perhaps we are in Hell? There are after all references to the 'soleil d'enfer' (31) which can ignite Winnie's umbrella in a moment. Winnie can even be read as the personification of humanity *per se*: the living human (it is remarkable how often the word 'vie' is repeated in the play) progressively and literally submerged in the backdrop, struggles against the rubble (whatever that signifies: death, disability, ageing, boredom...). In such a context, perhaps the play's use of mirrors, symmetrical structures and stage-tableaux, and themes of reflection, can be read in a similar mode: they do not merely allegorise Winnie's narcissistic vulnerabilities, nor only the play's engagement with its audience; they also symbolise the very plurality of Willie's and Willie's modes of signifying, to each other, and especially to us: they are never entirely literal, nor entirely metaphorical, but always at some blurred point along that spectrum.

In *Oh les beaux jours*, then, Beckett does not seem to prejudge narcissism as a cold, emotionless stasis in order to decry it; he envisages it rather as a spectrum, encompassing a variety of erotically- and emotionally-invested modes of meaning-making. The subversively ‘failed’ aesthetic mode Adorno sees in Beckett – the clash of mimesis with form – may thus also be seen in *Oh les beaux jours* as a vision of narcissism as omnipresent but variously impure, changing in mode and quality as the narcissist becomes differently conscious of others and objects. Winnie’s mirror-gazing is not distinguishable from, but intermingled and analogous with, such relationships, as well as with the audience’s similarly complicated engagement with what they are watching.

In the way Beckett thus contaminates narcissism, differentiating it from pure solipsism, his play shares key elements with André Green’s book *Narcissisme de vie narcissisme de mort*, whose sixth chapter – ‘la mère morte’ – has proved so important in recent readings of NDiaye.¹³ Green envisages primary narcissism as a variegated ‘structure’, rather than a solitary ‘état’, arguing there is never any stage in psychological development when no other ‘object’ is perceptible; it is just the quality of the relationship with that object which changes.¹⁴ Those experienced or before, or early in, oedipal stages of development (i.e. in ‘primary narcissism’) are more mysterious to their experiencer, less available to cognitive processing, because such processing capacities only come later in life. Narcissus, we recall, fell in love with a reflection which he mistakenly thought was somebody else; such dreamy, inchoate, intuitive, but nonetheless erotically and emotionally powerful encounters similarly mark narcissism as reconceptualised by Green. In his theory of ‘la mère morte’, it is as if the infant narcissist is rejected by his own reflection: what should be his/her main nourishing and caregiving presence is absent, distracted (even if not literally dead); by thus suffering ‘the dead mother’, the infant is haunted throughout later life by a sense of loss s/he will never be able to grasp or address fully. Cold, isolated,

¹³ See, chiefly, Andrew Asibong, *Marie NDiaye: Blankness and Recognition*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013) 23-8; Andrew Asibong, ‘Marie NDiaye, the Half-self and the White ‘Dead’ mother’, in *International Journal of Francophone Studies* Vol 5 Nos. 3 and 4 (2012): 541-59. See also André Green, *Narcissisme de vie narcissisme de mort* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, Coll. “Critique”, 1983), 222-53.

¹⁴ Green, *Narcissisme*, 80-132.

the child is paradoxically troubled as s/he grows up by a futile and perpetually unsatisfied need to gain her attention, and a peculiar sense that whatever “deadened” her is somehow his /her fault.

The mysterious ambiguity of pre-oedipal mourning, the need to atone for a nameless crime, marks not only NDiaye’s mellifluous but often coldly and exactingly precise prose – the stylistic corollary, perhaps, of what Asibong identifies as *blancness* – but also her work’s supernatural, hallucinatory flavour.¹⁵ The very weirdness of various episodes could be read as symbolic of the intangibility or ineffability of traumas suffered in the pre-oedipal stage, i.e. before rational capacities have been fully developed. In the short story *Une journée de Brulard*, Brulard’s (recently, literally) dead mother has risen again, mysteriously, in the form of a mountain (‘indiscrete et hostile’, 118), looming over the lake near her hotel:

Brulard sentait la montagne dans son dos, qui l’observait. La montagne encore invisible, enveloppée de nuages, descendait jusqu’au lac. Où qu’elle se tournât, Brulard devinait la montagne et il lui semblait que cette présence austère n’était que l’une des incarnations choisies par sa mère, morte depuis peu, pour peser sur la conscience de Brulard. Mais, oh, elle se moquait bien d’être surveillée. Elle s’en allait, fermement, vers un bonheur nouveau (117).¹⁶

The sense of persecution, rivalry and conflict between mother and daughter is clearly expressed by the mountain’s pervasive voyeurism (‘Où qu’elle se tournât...’), and images of weight (‘peser sur la conscience’). But what is also conspicuous is the ghostly mother’s implied ability to adopt a variety of presumably equally strange forms: the mountain is only ‘une des incarnations choisies par sa mère’. And this ability is completely unaffected even by her recent death, which the narrator is careful to mention. Brulard’s mother’s disapproval – this ‘présence austère’ is already mountainous, but even this isn’t enough: it may, it is implied, follow Brulard around, transferring from form to form,

¹⁵ Asibong coins the term *blancness* to denote an ‘attempted attainment of absolutely “post-racial” being [...] the typically NDiayan state, most often achieved only provisionally or else in fantasy, of being no longer recognizable as a racialized minority’ (Asibong, *Blankness*, p.19).

¹⁶ Marie NDiaye, ‘Une journée de Brulard’ in NDiaye, *Tous mes amis*. (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2004).

or even proliferating in multiple forms at once; Brulard's exasperated defiance, as emphasised by the interjected 'oh' and contemptuous verb 'se moquer', is distinctly fragile in such a context.

But if Brulard's literally dead mother haunts her incessantly and ubiquitously, there is the strong suggestion that Brulard has been a 'dead mother' in the metaphorical, Greenian sense to her own daughter, Lulu.¹⁷ Brulard pays Lulu only an 'attention distraite et lassé' (163), and justifies (albeit guiltily) her decision to leave her by contrasting her pleasure-seeking – 'peut-on renoncer à la possibilité d'une faveur soudaine?' (135) – with her own mother's guilt-inducing self-sacrifice: 'l'immortalité sous forme de montagne sévère était peut-être la seule récompense pour ses multiple renoncements' (*ibid*). But there is also a subtler suggestion that Brulard's neglect may in turn compel Lulu to treat her future children with Brulard-like indifference: Lulu's very name shrinks her mother's, doubling and inverting its central phonemes, if performing linguistically and in miniature the dwindling, twisted and schizoid maternal relationships their stories portray. Moreover, her entrance near the end of the story mirrors Brulard's encounter with her 'mother-mountain' near the beginning, repeating motifs of daughterly defiance: Brulard left Lulu behind with long hair 'intouchée depuis l'enfance'; her daughter has now cut it short, and dyed it bright orange (163). But perhaps the strongest indication of a kind of metempsychosis of maternal neglect, hopping generationally from victim to victim, comes when Brulard remarks an astonishing resemblance between her daughter and her hallucinatory visions of her own twenty-year-old self.¹⁸ Lulu suffers as Brulard once suffered. 'Comme cette Eve Brulard ressemblait à Lulu, se dit Brulard avec un pincement de déplaisir, de culpabilité' (145). Moreover, seeing as Lulu is a particularly skinny version of Eve, it is clear she is worn down by her mother's self-obsession.

As well as comparable suffering at the hands of 'dead mothers', however, the physical resemblance between Brulard's daughter and her younger self is central to how this story's themes develop Greenian intuitions: narcissism is emphatically not the straightforward opposite of

¹⁷ NDiaye's mothers are 'not evil; they are just spectacularly uninterested' (Asibong, 'NDiaye, the half-self', 547).

¹⁸ This point owes much to the discussion in Asibong, *Blankness*, 26-7.

relationship; it is, rather, and as Beckett also seems to suggest in *Oh les beaux jours*, the spectrum along and through which persons' various engagements and intersections with others can be described and compared, how they may be considered successful or failed. Tropes of mirrors and narcissistic themes – self-image, beauty, desire – proliferate but the 'narcissistic' boundaries which ordinarily distinguish 'the self' from 'the other' are paradoxically probed and scrutinised, emerging as fragile, porous and insecure. Indeed, the narrator silently suggests the same person is in fact at least two people, carefully and consistently differentiating the twenty-year-old 'Eve', or 'Eve Brulard' from the central character 'Brulard'. Eve's resemblance to Lulu is telling. The youngsters seem to have far more in common with each other than either has with Brulard; at the very least, they both elicit in her an ambivalent mix of fear, guilt and jealousy. Eve for example bitterly reminds her of her presumably now-vanished 'assurance', 'souplesse, and 'pointilleux sens critique' (119); an aggressive rivalry surfaces by moments between them 'Brulard fit tss tss entre ses dents, mécontente et sévère, et la jeune Eve Brulard s'évapora parmi la brune venue du lac, en poussant un petit cri d'effroi ou de derision' (114).

This scene figures an internalized, schizoid hostility – the older and younger Brulard war with each other – and exemplifies how, throughout, Brulard's sense of herself is confusedly fragmented. At one point, Brulard is not sure which of two wildly different personae she is playing: one dark-haired and meek, the other blonde and powerful, sufficiently distinct from Brulard 'herself' to attract from her a secret, narcissistic crush or 'faiblesse' (119-20). It is not surprising the narrator asks 'Qu'avait-on devant soi, quand on regardait Brulard?' (119): by moments it is as if she is lost, adrift in a web of differently projected, imagined selves, as if the whole of surrounding reality is merely a stimulus to variously-inflected kinds of narcissism. She cannot tell for sure, for example, if she sees the Alphonse family or just different manifestations of Eve: 'Était-il semblable qu'Eve Brulard pût se diviser en autant de simulacres, prendre l'apparence de quatre Alphonse expansifs et rigolards ?' (164). It is therefore not surprising that the story sees narcissism not as the self-satisfied Freudian idyll but as radically, uncannily confusing, self-divisive: 'Il lui arrivait, certains jours, de rencontrer si souvent cette figure

qu'elle en oubliait parfois qu'elle-même avait un visage différent et que, *tombant sur un miroir*, elle se demandait fugitivement : qui est cette femme plus très jeune, qu'a-t-elle à me cacher la lumière ?' (115, my italics).

The story's foggy landscape – note the near-rhyme of 'Brulard' with 'brouillard' – frames and accentuates the blurred boundaries of this narcissistic phenomenology. It is the space from which the mother-mountain looms, into which Eve disappears ('La jeune femme qu'elle était autrefois [...] s'évapora parmi la brume venue du lac' (114)) and which seems almost hypnotically to encourage a narcissising outlook on the world: even a dog's eyes here become a kind of mirror. But, again, the tantalising prospect of self-knowledge or self-affirmation – 'l'être véritable et secret de Brulard' – is intimated but never grasped, raised only to be frustrated:

Il lui sembla que le miroir sombre des pupilles du chien ne lui renvoyait pas l'image de sa propre figure réduite mais autre chose, d'inattendu, d'inexplicable – comme si, se dit Brulard déroutée, elle avait soudain changé d'aspect au point de ne plus se reconnaître, ou encore comme si l'être véritable et secret de Brulard, dont elle-même n'avait pas la moindre idée, qu'elle ne pouvait décrire même en le découvrant ainsi révélé dans le regard (132).

Une journée de Brulard thus envisages and depicts an impurity at the very heart of narcissism, in its depiction of continuously problematic mother-daughter relationships, and its loose and fluid boundaries between one character and another, which extends to its narrative technique and perspective: while never in the first person, the heavy and frequent use of free-indirect-discourse ensures that the reader's consciousness hovers strangely within and around Brulard's: the reader is absorbed into Brulard's mind, much like Brulard is absorbed into her foggy and ultimately fruitless self-obsession. The story's deconstruction of ostensibly solid distinctions between persons feeds powerfully into its waspish satire of glamour and feminine celebrity: it traces how 'stars' are absorbed into their own image, and how such processes condition and determine everyday distinctions between 'success' and 'failure'. Brulard appeared once in a minor role in a film. This helps explain Brulard's

jealous, often antagonistic relationship with her younger self, as well as why Brulard's and Eve Brulard's names are carefully distinguished by the narrator: 'Eve Brulard' is a stage name, of which poor 'Brulard' is now conspicuously deprived. She thus seems from the very beginning obsessed by money, desiring objects that will restore her to her former beauty, glory and identity ('si l'argent est là j'achèterai un manteau' (112)), fretting about bouncing cheques and keeping up appearances: 'elle voulait qu'on le croie assez aisée pour payer sans problème ses nuits dans un hôtel un peu luxueux' (113). Brulard's conflict with Eve is thus closely tied up with her interwoven financial and aesthetic insecurities and jealousies. Brulard's and Eve's clothes, shoes and accessories are carefully contrasted: Eve wears 'une extravagante robe de mousseline rose' (118) but Brulard's frequently-mentioned 'trotteurs' are a source of shame (114, 119). Her partner Jimmy only strengthens this close association of financial with aesthetic insecurities, because his poverty is frequently invoked. For example, Brulard bitchily observes 'Jimmy avait une exceptionnelle bonne mine, une élégance inattendue (payés avec quoi)' (129), while Jimmy regrets 'tout serait différent si j'étais riche' (148) and behaves awkwardly ('chemises haut boutonnées' (145)) with stylish company like the wealthy Rotors. Even his dog fears 'la senteur de l'argent, de la bourgeoisie, des châteaux, [...] les bonnes manières' (151).

In this framework of paranoid status anxiety commodities are portrayed as interchangeable with, even as important as, human beings; they are subject to similarly narcissistic absorptions, hallucinations, projections and investments: in her fatigue, Brulard confuses herself with a photographed 'carton découpé' of herself, presumably taken in her glory days, advertising 'un spectacle exceptionnel' (113); her identity in the old film she discusses with the unimpressed hotel employee is reduced to a 'foulard jaune' (125), an image which resurfaces twice (153, 158). The ending may be seen as the culmination of the subjection of the narcissistic integrity of Brulard's 'self' to hallucinations, daughters, mothers, and commodified images and props. Yet once more, her sense of identity seems conditional if not dependent on the gaze of another: here Jimmy's. 'La dernière pensée tranquille, presque froide qui vint à Brulard fut que jamais personne ne l'avait regardée avec autant de compassion ni d'amitié' (166). The ambiguity of the syntax is telling. Is the narrator suggesting that

Brulard will never have a tranquil, cold thought ever again? Or, yet more troublingly, that this is the last thought Brulard has before dying? The connotations of 'froide', together with the use of the *passé simple*, might invite such a reading. This subtle, even casual suggestion of death, simultaneous with the sudden ending, reminds us that 'Brulard' is, more than anything else, a verbal construct – as anticipated by the wordplays of 'Brulard' with 'brouillard' and with 'Lulu' – this 'defamiliarisation' effect shocks a reader out of any easy, identificatory narcissism, much as Jimmy's 'amitié' – the story's last word – brings Brulard's narcissistic anxieties to an end, or even injects her narcissism with a paradoxical sense of togetherness.

This essay has sought to explore how thinking about the possible ramifications of 'narcissism', both as theorised in the critical reception and methodology of Beckett and NDiaye, and as thematised in *Oh les beaux jours* and *Une journée de Brulard*, intersect productively with questions of success and failure. Freud theorised narcissism – a clinically-defined complaint, a 'failed' psychology – as the quest to regain the pure plenitude of 'primary narcissism', an infantine state in which no other object or person was perceptible. This was the sense of 'narcissism' implied in Frankfurt School thinking about the psychological appeal of mass conformity, the resulting urge to reject and even slaughter others, and why Beckett's art 'fails': Beckett's internally contradictory arrangement of 'mimetic' and 'formal' elements was seen to challenge, fragment and parody such homogenising, ultimately murderous normativity. In *Oh les beaux jours*, however, narcissism contained subtly positive elements, not least in the way Winnie's love for her objects, including her mirror, blurs into her love for Willie, and thus into the creative potential for relationship with others and her audience. Narcissism is less the opposite of love than its impetus. The relationship between Beckett's 'failed' art and narcissism could be correspondingly re-expressed: Beckett envisages and silently praises a kind of impure narcissism. In this, key themes of *Oh les beaux jours* demonstrably parallel those of André Green's work on the pre-oedipal stage of child development, and his theorisation of primary narcissism not as a 'state' but as an impure 'structure' of internally differentiated elements: rather than being 'sealed off' from social relationship at the very beginning of life; the infant could perceive and be wounded by failures in

caregiving. In *Une journée de Brulard*, to be sure, such failures are marked and conspicuous, but the story's treatment of narcissism extends also to its satire of how women compulsively and often (self-) destructively replace themselves with their own image in the name of celebrity, fame, and other spuriously commodified definitions of success, but also with the fragile 'amitié' which ends the tale. Despite its ordinarily pejorative sense, then, narcissism is not in these texts simply an unambiguous 'failure' to relate to other people; by exploring narcissism's various qualities, the writers' 'aesthetics of failure' is inseparable from the way they envisage narcissism as a complex without which human relationships cannot take place, and through which their successes and failures can be measured and articulated.

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